DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 886 HE 026 329

AUTHOR Huntley, Helen S.
TITLE Adult International Students: Problems of Adjustment.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adult Students; College Students; Cultural Influences; Foreign Nationals; *Foreign Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Language Fluency; Maturity (Individuals); Postsecondary Education; Research; School Orientation; Social Integration; *Student Adjustment; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity (Student)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines research findings on adult international students and their adjustment problems while attending U.S. schools of higher education. Specific areas related to the adult student, some of which may also involve related issues of gender and country of origin, are discussed, as well as problem areas and hurdles unique to foreign students in the areas of language barriers, academic performance, social adjustment, and adjustment to support services. It is noted that adult international graduate students, whose enrollments are increasing beyond undergraduate levels, are subject to the same stresses of academic and personal life as are their American counterparts, but these stresses are compounded when the student is inserted into an unfamiliar culture and surrounded by a language of limited comprehensibility. Adults, moreover, have a tendency to manifest less flexibility than younger students, even to the extent of having lower food tolerances. Therefore, it is suggested that, for this group, periods of adjustment are needed that include English classes, cultural orientations, and peer support programs in order to help ease mature international students into a new and unfamiliar educational environment. (Contains 25 references.) (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Helen S. Huntley
Ohio Program of Intensive English
Gordy Hall
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701

ED355886

ADULT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT

Some of us can speak good English, but most of us could not speak fluently when we first came. You felt embarassed if somebody asks you "Pardon me?" , "Could you say it again?" After a couple of times, you would rather close your mouth. If you have only limited vocabulary, you cannot have a large range of topics that you can talk about with others. You may know it, but you can't express yourself.

(Feng 14)

HE026 329

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Helen S. Huntley
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ADULT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT

The number of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities reached a record number of 407,500 in the 1990-91 academic year, surpassing the previous year's enrollment by 5.3 per cent and leading the way for even greater numbers projected for the years ahead. Asians - particularly students from China, Japan, Taiwan, India, and Korea - accounted for 56 percent (229,800) of the total international student population, followed by Europeans (49,600) whose ranks have swollen with influxes of Eastern Europeans. Changing economic and political situations, however, have led to decreases in the numbers of students from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. For these international students, Business is the most popular field of study, followed by Engineering, math and computer sciences, and physical and life sciences. With a 7% increase in the number of graduate students, there is an almost equal balance between undergraduate and graduate students, one third of whom are pursuing doctoral degrees, while the numbers of woman enrolled have continued to increase to a record 36% (ESL-HEIS Newsletter). It is clear that several trends emerge from the present and projected demographics of international students: the international population is composed of more Asian students, more graduate and doctoral students, and more women than ever before, and it is expected that those numbers will increase significantly over the course of the decade.

These trends towards Asian, graduate, and female student enrollments in various combinations means that the problems of adjustment to both academic and social life in the United States may be different from those encountered in the past by

international advisors and counselors, faculty, and members of the community. Each of these groups has its own set of adjustment problems to work out in the new community, some of which can form formidable barriers to successful integration or to successful academic study. A thorough understanding of the problems faced by these students, therefore, should lead to more successful ways of dealing with them or showing the students themselves how to make their own adjustments

First it should be clear that international students are subject to the same stresses of academic and personal life as are their American counterparts. These stresses, however, are compounded by being plunged into an unfamiliar culture and surrounded by a language of limited comprehensibility. Additionally, each international student will have to go through several periods of adjustment, commonly known as culture shock. The first stage of adjustment occurs before leaving home when the student anticipates, usually with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, the new life ahead. As a new arrival, the student is generally a passive spectator until confidence builds for the participation stage, an experience which may be stimulating to some, overwhelming to others. After a period of time, disenchantment with the host country sets in - the culture shock stage - during which depression and alienation may cause acute homesickness and withdrawal. However, the despair eventually gives way to adjustment in which period the student is able to make a more or less successful integration into the community. The final stage of adjustment occurs upon reentry into the native country, when the student has to come to terms with the fact that his or her values, ideologies, and life styles have changed as a result of the experiences in the foreign country while those of the families and compatriots have not. Although personality differences influence the severity of these stages, all international students will experience them to a greater or lesser degree, whatever their country of origin, their sex, or their age. However, research over a period of

twenty years seems to support the hypothesis that age is a greater barrier to adjustment, that women suffer more adjustment problems, and that those who come from very different cultural and academic environments are more likely to have greater difficulty adapting to the culture of the United States. The scope of this study is to examine the findings of studies of graduate students, (adult students) in terms of specific problem areas related to age, some of which may also involve related issues of gender and country of origin. These problem areas have been broadly defined in the literature pertaining to international students as language, academics, and social adjustment.

The number of international graduate students now equals and seems likely to surpass the number of international undergraduate students, a small percentage of whom are also adult students. Broadly speaking, graduate students may be categorized as those who have been out of formal education for a number of years, and are returning to gain an advanced degree to enhance their employment opportunities. The age range of these students varies considerably, up to the age of 64 at Ohio University for example, with the majority falling between the ages of 24 and 35. Many of these students have been employed for a period of time in their own countries and are highly motivated - for themselves, for their families and for prestige - to achieve academically at an American university.

LANGUAGE

The first hurdle that is faced by any international student is one of language. Prior English language learning and real-life exposure may have been extensive or severely limited. Nevertheless, to adapt successfully to American culture and academic demands, all foreign students must master both conversational and formal English. However, approximately one third of international students rate their own

performance upon arrival as inadequate and the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) mandated at most universities for international students may reveal an even higher number of students lacking adequate proficiency skills in English. These students will have to enrol in English language classes until their English is judged to be at an accepable level. Many older students find themselves in this situation because their English language skills have fallen into disuse or were never developed in the political climates of their own school days. These students may well find themselves in the situation of being forced to spend a lot of time and money on learning English, instead of embarking on their field of study, leading to frustration and annoyance. Even when they do make it to the classroom, international students may still lack the English language skills necessary for full participation. Serious problems in understanding lectures, taking notes, answering questions, and writing essays were reported by many Asian students in a study by Heikenheimo (1986):

> *Teachers say, "Why are Chinese quiet?" Understanding problems causes silence and vocabulary causes difficulties. My skill of writing is quite poor. Sometimes I do poorly in exams because my English isn't enough. I express things in my own way and the profs don't get it (401).*

In addition, many international students come from academic environments in their own countries which discourage active participation and speaking for any reason in class. Those students, generally Asians, find adaptation to the American classroom especially difficult and culturally alien, leading to great stress when forced to give oral presentations, participate in group activities, or simply ask questions:

> *Usually, I don't participate. It is cultural that I don't do it. I'm not used to it. Often Chinese students are active when the prof asks the class to list facts, but when there should be*

> *discussion and defending points, Canadians take over. We are not taught to be argumentative. We are taught to listen (Heikenheimo 402).*

While international students in undergraduate studies may be able to get by without a great deal of participation, the expectations of graduate and doctoral studies are quite different. A student who is unable to participate in seminars and interact with both peers and faculty is unlikely to excel despite the knowledge and expertise he or she may have.

In addition, adequate English skills are necessary to partake in the social life of the university and the community. Those with limited speaking and listening skills (although their reading and writing skills may be good) inevitably have trouble socially with Americans whose accents, idioms, and jokes seem incomprehensible.

> *We learn standard English in China, but we know little idiom. People here speak with southern accent, talk in idioms, so that we hardly understand. I have trouble understanding American jokes. When they laugh, I don't know what they are laughing about, which makes me feel bad (Feng13)*

ACADEMICS

Studies on the effects of age on academic performance have produced varying results. Several researchers (El-Lakany, 1970; Siriboonma, 1978) reported that older students had higher academic performance, while Hj:zainuddin (1974) found that younger students performed better academically. Solmon and Young (1987), however, concluded that international graduate students have "demonstrated consistently higher indicators of quality than did their American counterparts" (ix) and

Goodwin and Nacht (1983) reported the claim of some prestigious U.S.institutions that "the foreign students are consistently among the best on campus" (37). These assertions are supported by Kenneth Rogers, the Director of International Services at Indiana University who characterized foreign students as "academically low-risk students, less likely to perform at a below-average level in the classroom and more likely to attain their educational objectives in less time than other non-traditional students" (Allemeh, 11). Moreover, a NAFSA publication in 1972 characterized international students as being "perceived by their departments to be among the best and poorest of their graduate students, more successful as research assistants than as teaching assistants, more theoretical and analytical than United States students, and more industrious and hard-working than United States students" (6).

While the level of achievement reported amongst graduate students lacks consistency, their adjustment difficulties to academic life seem to show more consistent patterns. Gaither and Griffin (1971) stated that adjustment problems for younger foreign students were minimal compared to those of older students. Han (1975) reported a similar conclusion, in that foreign students more than 30 years old encountered more major academic problems than younger students. Solomon and Young (1987) cite the compounded problems for them of being out of school for a number of years and thus finding adjustment to academic life more difficult than if they had moved immediately from one level to another.

The field in which a foreign student majors may also determine the probability of his or her success in academic performance and in the problems to be faced. Chongolee (1978) found that engineering majors had the highest performance, followed by physical science majors, then biological science majors, while social science majors had the lowest academic performance. This finding correlates to the language needs of each major, with higher English language proficiency in all skill

areas necessary for social sciences. Since the fields of study chosen by the majority of international students are in science and technology whose language requirements are lower, it would seem that international students choose majors which tend to enhance their possibilities of success.

In terms of support from faculty, Goodwin and Nacht (1983) reported that some hostility prevailed towards international students - "wet noodles soaking up anything you pour over them," and "bazaar merchants haggling over grades" etc. (10). They concluded that there were three reasons for the antipathy towards international students: first, "fear of the unknown"; second an "unwillingness of faculty to commit the extra time needed to teach foreign students effectively or even to take seriously their pedagogical problems" ; and thirdly, "passivity in the classroom, unwillingness to accept objective grading, even slowness to laugh at faculty jokes" (10).

Heavy academic pressure is often experienced by international students who may be financially liable to foreign governments or to their families. To fail or to perform poorly might result in shame not only to the individual involved, but to the family also.

> *We Africans cannot afford to fail because our family would be disappointed and we don't want to see that happen. If I fail, it isn't only that I fail. It only means that my father's son and my uncle's nephew failed and they carry the same reputation (Heikinheimo 402).*

In general, it is reported that students with sponsorships and government grants had higher performance ratings than those who did not (El-Lakany, 1970). In addition, many international graduate students have limited financial resources and few employment opportunities in the United States because of visa restrictions. Thus, there is a tendency to cram as many courses as possible into as short a time as

possible, resulting in a vicious cycle of stress and overwork.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Poor language skills are detrimental not only to the academic process, but also to social interaction with Americans. Many studies have found a high correlation between poor English language speaking skills and a lack of interaction with American students and the community as a whole. Undergraduates often live in dormitories and have daily interaction with American students, thus improving their language skills and their intercommunication skills. A study by Quinn in 1975 found that undergraduate foreign students had, indeed, the most successful adjustments, while Ph. D. students had the least succesful adjustment . Graduates usually have to find their own housing and often form enclaves with students from their own countries, thus further alienating them from the American culture and language. As one international student advisor describes the situation, Chinese students tend to become embarassed at their langage problems and then retreat socially to the community in which they are most comfortable:

> *If you live with your Chinese fellows, you speak Chinese all the time. You don't have chance practicing your English language. But most Chinese students do live with Chinese... They live together, speak Chinese, and isolate from others (Feng 14).*

Another isolating factor among graduate students is that many of them are married and bring their families with them. Although married students are reported to have higher academic achievement than singles (El-Lakany, 1970), greater satisfaction with their U.S. experience (Siriboonma, 1978), and fewer major problems

than singles (Han, 1975), their main social impetus comes from within the family rather than in the community beyond it. Since it has been found that international students who spent more of their leisure time with Americans were significantly better adapted than those who spent more leisure time with fellow citizens (Surdam & Collins 19) it may be concluded that married students are generally less well adjusted to the foreign community than single students who have assimilated well, although they may have better support systems than their single counterparts, suffer less homesickness, and avoid loneliness. On the other hand, married students are also responsible for the well-being of spouses and children who have been removed from a familiar and supportive environment at home and lack a clearly defined role in the new community, especially if they are not also students. The adult international married student may then face a myriad of roles to fulfil, with the resultant stress on his/her academic and private life. On the whole, married men are reported to suffer from less stress than married women, probably because women may have significantly greater role conflict stemming from their responsibilities as wives and mothers in addition to their obligations as students (Gilbert & Holahan, 1982). While some married students bring their spouses and children with them, others are forced into long separations for financial, political or personal reasons. For many of these spouses, the stress of trying to maintain long-distance relationships may be a powerful inhibitor to successful adjustment.

Just as adult American students face a wide variety of problems in returning to academic life after a period of absence, so too international students vary in the way they adjust to a new culture, a new language, and a new academic environment. However, international students have both common problems and problems peculiar to their own national groups. A study by Guglielmino and Perkins (1975) at the University of Georgia found significant differences in perceptions of problems amongst

Chinese, Indian, and other international students. The Chinese ranked language as their most serious problem, followed by racial or religious discrimination, homesickness, separation from family in the home country, and unfriendliness of people from the community. Indians, however, indicated in order, finances, dating, separation from family, homesickness, and housing, as the major problems while other international students of non-differentiated nationalities ranked the five top problems in order as finances, lack of good friends, English proficiency, homesickness, and separation from family (383). In general, it has been found that Europeans adapt more easily to life in the United States than do international students whose native cultures, languages, and academic institutions differ greatly from those found in the United States.

ADJUSTMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

While acknowledging that all adult international students will suffer at some time from adjustment problems, whether they be language-related, academic, or social, there is much that institutions and communities can do to provide support and advice. In planning orientation and community relations programs for foreign students, university personnel should recognize that academic achievement is the highest priority for most students and that they are likely to experience strong academic pressures. It is important, then, for university counseling and student service staff to make contact with students at the beginning of their programs to try to divert potential problems. Once problems do occur, students should be encouraged to use counseling services whose practitioners have been trained in cross-cultural counseling. According to Surdam & Collins, only 10% of international students seek personal counseling, and only 6% seek academic advisement (244), preferring instead to make contact with faculty and peers from the country of origin. Additionally,

it is reported that international graduate students have a tendency towards somatization, in which stress manifests itself in physical symptoms (Mallinckrodt & Leong 77). Clinicians, therefore, need to be aware that a student's physical symptoms may be stress-related and take into account the preferred mode of help-seeking and healing practices in the student's native culture.

Because adaptation is a process that blends academic, social, financial, cultural, and language related elements, international students should be encouraged to adopt an open-minded view concerning the incongruities of the host country. Adults have a tendency to manifest less flexibility than younger students, even to the extent of having lower food tolerances. However, a period of adjustment which may include English classes, cultural orientations, and peer support programs can help mature international students ease into a strange and sometimes bewildering environment.

In many cases, adaptation problems of international students remain relatively unknown to academic and support staff of institutions, which has helped to promote the "wet noodle" attitude of some faculty. Cross-cultural workshops arranged for university personnel and instructors could go a long way towards helping them understand the adaptation problems of foreign students and to developing supportive response patterns.

The International Advising Center may be the first port of call for most international students with problems, but it is certainly not the only one nor even the most appropriate resource. Students should be encouraged to reach out to language teaching staff, to academic advisors, to student support groups, to counselors and to each other. There is help available if they only have the wherewithal to find it.

ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS OF ADULT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allameh, Joy. *Just who are these international students anyway?* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages. Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 12-15, 1989. ED 319 260.

Chongolnee, Burunchai. *Academic, situational, organismic, and attitudinal factors affecting the academic achievement of foreign graduate students at Iowa State University.* Ph.D. dissertation, Iowa State University, 1978.

El-Lakany, F.A. *Prediction of academic achievement of foreign students at Iowa State University, 1969-70.* Ph.D. dissertation. Iowa State University, 1970.

ESL-HEIS Newsletter. *Foreign student enrollment in U.S. higher eduation exceeds 400,000.* Jan/Feb, 1991, 4.

Feng, Jianhua. *The adaptation of students from the People's Republic of China to an American academic culture*, 1991. ED329833.

Gaither, Gerald H. & Griffin, Anthony C. *The international students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.* Office of Institutional Research, University of Tennessee, 1971.

Gilbert L.A. & Holahan, C.K. Conflicts between student/professional, parental and self-development roles: A comparison of high and low effective copers. *Human Relations*, 35, 1982, 635-648.

Goodwin, C.D. & Nacht, M. *Absence of decision* (Research Report #1). New York: Institute of International Education, 1983.

Guglielmo, L. & Perkins, C. *Problems of international students attending the University of Georgia.* Office of International Student Affairs, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, 1975.

Han, Pyung Eui. *A study of the goals and problems of foreign graduate students from the Far East at the University of Southern California.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1975.

Hj:zainuddin, Tarmodi Bin. *Factors associated with the academic performance of Malaysian students at Loiusiana State University.* Master thesis. Louisiana State University, 1974.

Heikenheimo, P.S. & Shute, J.C.M. The adaptation of foreign students: Student views and institutional implications. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 1986, 27(5), 399-406.

Lee, Motoko Y.; Abd-Ella Mokhtar; & Burks, Linda. *Needs of foreign students from developing nations at U.S. colleges and universities.* Washington, D.C.: National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, U.S. Agency for International Development, 1981.

Leong, Frederick T.L.; Mallinckrodt, Brent; & Kralj, Mary M. Cross-cultural variations in stress and adjustment among Asian and Caucasian graduate students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 1990, 18, 19-27.

Mallinckrodt, Brent & Leong, Frederick T.L. International graduate students, stress and

social support. *Journal of College Student Development*, 1992, 33(1), 71-78.

Manese, Jeanne E.; Sedlacek, William E.; & Leong, Frederick T.L. Needs and perceptions of female and male international undergraduate students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 1988 (Jan.), 24-28.

National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) Field Service Program. *An inquiry into departmental policies and practices in relation to the graduate education of foreign students.* Washington, D.C., 1972.

Open doors:Report on international educational exchange. Marianthi Zikopoulos, ed. New York: Institute of International Education, 1987.

Perkins, Carolyn S.; Perkins, Mark L.; Guglielmo, Lucy M.; & Reiff, Richard F. A comparison of the adjustment problems of three international student groups. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 1977, 18, 382-388.

Quinn, Walter Albert. *A study of selected sojourn preferences and priorities of Stanford University foreign students.* Ph.D. dissertation. Stanford University, 1975.

Siriboonma, Umporn. *An analysis of student satisfaction as perceived by foreign students at Iowa State University.* Ph.D dissertation. Iowa State University, 1978.

Solomon, L. Cl. & Young, B. J. *The foreign student factor: Impact on American higher education.* New York: Institute of International Education, 1987.

Spaulding, Seth & Flack, Michael J. *The world's students in the United States: A review and evaluation of research on foreign students.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976.

Story, Kathryn E. The student development professional and the foreign student: A conflict of values? *Journal of College Student Personnel,* 1982, 66-69.

Surdan, Joyce C. & Collins, James R. Adaptation of international students: A cause for concern. *Journal of College Student Personnel,* 1984, 25(3), 240-245.